

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

pö Bradley s my station and its duties and its mo

Babushkina, Dina

2019-10

pö Babushkina , D 2019 , ' Bradley s my station and its duties and its m
, Zeitschrift für Ethik und Moralphilosophie , vol. 2 , no. 2 , pp. 195-211 . <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42048-019-00049-0>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/313528>

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42048-019-00049-0>

cc_by

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.



Bradley’s “my station and its duties” and its moral (in)significance

Dina Babushkina

Published online: 14 November 2019
© The Author(s) 2019

Abstract I argue that, according to F.H. Bradley’s *Ethical Studies*, duties of our station (positional duties) are not morally obligatory unless they are required from an ideal point of view. I support my interpretation by showing that Bradley places the ideal point of view higher than the social and requires that what society demands from us is evaluated from that higher point of view. My argument relies on a detailed analysis of “my station and its duties”. The phrase must be understood as a category that (1) refers to different concepts throughout *Ethical Studies* (i.e. a theory that Bradley rejects, a revised thesis that he accepts, and positional duties), and (2) embraces several theses (descriptive, normative, and ideal), each involving a number of claims, only a few of which Bradley accepts. I argue that Bradley rejects the normative thesis of MSID theory that identifies moral obligation with social requirements because he finds bottom-up idealization (what ought to be must conform to what is) unsatisfactory. Bradley’s inclusion of “my station and its duties” in the moral ideal must be understood as amounting to the claim that a positional duty is morally obligatory only when it is justified by the norms governing pre-institutionalised relationships.

Keywords my station and its duties · social requirements · moral obligation · duty · moral ideal · ideal morality · F. H. Bradley

D. Babushkina (✉)

Unit of Social and Moral Philosophy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki,
Unioninkatu 40 A, P.O. Box 24, 00014 Helsinki, Finland
E-Mail: dina.babushkina@helsinki.fi



1 Introduction

An important ethical question concerning “my station and its duties” is its relation to moral obligation and moral right(good)/wrong(bad). We cannot formulate Bradley’s position unless we develop a clear picture of what “my station and its duties” refers to (Sect. 1) and which claims are associated with it (Sect. 3). The phrase is frequently used ambiguously. Bradley’s style is to blame for this: he uses the same phrase “my station and its duties”¹ to denote different theses throughout *Ethical Studies* (*ES*) (1962). Depending on the context, this phrase may refer to:

- a) *The MSID theory*, described and criticised in Essay V. The theory is based on the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit* and includes various descriptive and normative claims, most of which Bradley denies.
- b) *Positional duties* as tasks that a person possesses because of her position/role.² As normative statements, positional duties say what I must do as a member of a social institution. These are conditional duties which apply only if I agree to be a part of this institution. They are non-universalizable and, therefore, non-morally normative commands, or social commands (Stern 2013), justified by the customs that I accept. In their descriptive aspect, positional duties specify the content of my duty. Like in a job description, positional duties are attributed or “pertain” to (*ES*, 176) the station or role itself, and the person acquires these only when she occupies the respective station or attains the respective role.
- c) *The revised MSID thesis* stated in Essay VI, after the MSID theory has been criticised (Essay V), and consists of claims that Bradley accepts. The thesis says that what we are morally obliged to do often coincides³ with what we are required to do in virtue of our relationship with others, where the obligation is constituted by what others have a reason to expect from us *from an ideal point of view*.
- d) *The first component of Bradley’s moral ideal*, described in Essay VI (*ES*, 219–24). This is a normative concept. It tells which actions, required in virtue of one’s relationship with others, are also morally obligatory, i.e. prescribed from an ideal point of view. I suggest it prescribes those positional duties which are justified by the norms governing pre-institutionalised relationships.⁴

My main concern is whether, according to Bradley, we are morally obliged to perform our positional duties. I will be arguing that we are not, that Bradley distinguishes moral from social norms, and believes that performing a positional duty may be morally wrong. I will demonstrate that the relationship between positional duties and moral obligation in *ES* is properly approached via the normative concept of the moral ideal and the revised MSID thesis (Sects. 6 and 7). This is evident from

¹ This spelling is for ambiguous cases.

² On positional duties, see Simmons (1981).

³ I interpret Bradley’s saying that the most important contribution to the content of the moral ideal comes from “my station and its duties” as this statistical claim.

⁴ Many commentators seem to not distinguish between these four usages. E.g., Wollheim (1969), Nicholson (1990), and Keene (2009) do not differentiate between (b) and (d) as they claim that the moral ideal includes existing social duties.



the development of Bradley's argument in Essays V-VI. I will reconstruct Bradley's exposition of the MSID theory (Sect. 4) and its criticism (Sect. 5). I will begin by showing that the treatment of "my station and its duties" in secondary sources is problematic (Sect. 2) and that the correct approach should start with clarifying the multitude of theses and claims that the phrase refers to throughout Essays V-VI (Sect. 3).

2 Secondary sources on 'my station and its duties'

The presentation of "my station and its duties" and its ethical implications in the secondary literature is hardly satisfactory. The good news is that, due to the work of Wollheim (1969, 1962), Candlish (1978), and Nicholson (1990), the vulgar view (e.g., Rashdall 1907, Sabine 1915, Santayana 1933, Stebbing 1948, Krook 1959) identifying Bradley's moral views with the theory that he describes as "my station and its duties" is no longer accepted,⁵ and Bradley's connection with conservatism⁶ and communitarianism,⁷ if not dismissed, is no longer taken for granted.

The not-so-good news is that the *moral significance* of compliance with social demands, justified by custom and tradition, is still heavily overestimated. With variations, Bradley's "my station and its duties" is understood as a thesis that, because of our social nature, we achieve our self-realization only when we are a part of a social whole,⁸ and that our duties come from the station we occupy.⁹ It is a position of conformity to the rules and customs of one's society. Warnock sums up the dominant interpretation of *ES* saying that: "The concept of 'My Station and its Duties' is the core of Bradley's moral theory. The last two essays ... are devoted to further elaboration of this notion" (1971, p. 9). With modifications, this view consists of a belief that the MSID theory, after acknowledgment of its limitations, is *mostly* accepted by Bradley with *some* corrections or *additions* that are described in Essay VI under the title "Ideal Morality".

Here are some examples of the dominant interpretation. According to Wollheim, Bradley offers an "extended" MSID theory, according to which "[t]he first and ... most important contribution [to the good self] comes from one's station and its duties" (1969, 246–47). Candlish suggests that Bradley, acknowledging its problems, accepts the MSID theory, as it overcomes the gap between ought and is, while believing that this resolution is incomplete (1978, pp. 163–4). For Nicholson, Bradley, despite believing that the MSID theory cannot explain the content of our

⁵ Sparked by Sidgwick's review of *ES* (1876), the vulgar view gained popularity, as Keene (2009) suggests, due to Ross's (1951) edition of *ES* without Essays VI-VII.

⁶ Nicholson gives an overview of advocates of the vulgar view and those who connect Bradley to conservatism (1984, pp. 129–130 n. 1). For an argument against Bradley's conservatism, see Nicholson (1990, pp. 39–49).

⁷ On Bradley and communitarianism see, e.g., Simmons (2001, pp. 80–81, n. 38).

⁸ Candlish (1978) and Irwin (2009) emphasize the self-realization part.

⁹ Mander distinguishes between "dimensions" of "my station and its duties", i.e. metaphysical, deontological, and teleological claims (see 2011, p. 189).



ideal selves, does not reject the MSID theory because it “supplies the larger, and the most important, part of [their] content” (1990, p. 33). Bradley’s message is that “the actual sphere of the objective world of station and duty” must be “amended by the ideals of its own improvement that grow out of itself, and... supplemented by non-social ideals” (Nicholson 1990, pp. 34-5). Mander takes a similar stance, saying that Bradley, albeit admitting “‘very serious objections’ to his theory” because “there is more to ethics than just my station and its duties”, claims that it is the most important content of the good self, to which are ‘added’ social ideals or aspirations and the pursuit of truth and beauty (2011, pp. 190-1).

This prevailing approach has a weakness. It underestimates the fact that Bradley identifies serious problems with the MSID theory and fails to explain how Bradley “amends” the MSID theory in order to make it plausible as a *moral* theory. Many questions are left unanswered: Is it implied that Bradley’s non-social duties are supererogatory? Or are they *prima facie* duties? Or is Bradley understood as latently proposing that there are “two moralities”, i.e. social and ideal? It is doubtful that mere “supplementing” can make MSID a plausible moral theory. The dominant view either takes Bradley’s objections to the MSID theory too lightly, or assumes that Bradley does not consider them morally significant. This leads to a fundamental confusion about Bradley’s ethics, which, with such an approach, appears to lack satisfactory resolution of the problems with the MSID theory. Nicholson and Mander try to strengthen what appears to be a weakness in Bradley’s position by saying that he reserves a way to override social morality in case it turns out to be based on corrupted principles. Norman goes as far as to conclude that Bradley’s normative claims are unsustainable and must be revised (1983, p. 155).¹⁰ Similarly, Banchetti (1992) and Bell (1984) believe that in *ES* the moral point of view is inherently contradictory and no fully satisfactory moral theory is possible. Daly (1963) concludes Bradley’s ethics is undeveloped, while Brink thinks Bradley is in danger of “moral parochialism” (2007, p. 112).

I suggest, that the problem with the dominant view is that it fails to sufficiently differentiate MSID theory’s normative thesis, which Bradley rejects, and the revised MSID thesis, which he accepts. As a result, the moral significance of the ideal point of view is downplayed, and the fact that the first component of the moral ideal is a normative concept (referring to norms of interpersonal relationships) and not a descriptive concept (referring to positional duties) is overlooked.

There is an approach better equipped to address these problems; it downplays the moral significance of “my station and its duties” in *ES*, identifying the moral with the ideal point of view. For example, MacNiven (1996) argues that, in *ES*, personalism is a higher step in one’s moral development compared to institutionalism (conformity to social rules).¹¹ Under personalism,

morality becomes self-conscious, critical, and personal. This is the stage of the fully mature moral agent, who is a self-legislating moral being, interpreting social roles in the light of general moral principles like respect for persons,

¹⁰ Simmons (1981) argues that moral obligation is not conditioned by positional duties.

¹¹ See also MacNiven (1987).



benevolence, fairness, respect for life, and self-perfection... This is the stage of *ideal morality*. Ideal morality is "no longer relative to the societies in which we live". (MacNiven 1996, pp. 100-1)

James Bradley suggests that the MSID theory, which "represents the first theoretical elaboration of the nascent vocational ethic of service which went hand-in hand with the newly emergent 'professions'" and is based on "the ethical self-definition of the expanding professional middle-classes in order to secure ... the 'organic' interpretation of self and society" is "condemned" in *ES*, inter alia, because Bradley "finds it impossible ethically to legitimate any prevailing social order" (1996, pp. 60-1). Ilodigwe argues that *ES* promotes an ethical theory that is capable of embracing social and personal points of view. According to Ilodigwe, Bradley introduces the ideal "in terms of which the legitimate demands of these varied regions of the self [empirical, transcendental, and social] are realised" and denies that "the realisation of the social self necessarily [is] the realisation of the ideal self, except the social self is in conformity with its ideal self" (2004, p. 68).¹²

Even though these works direct the reading of *ES* in a more productive and faithful direction, they still lack an analytical *interpretation* and thorough, detailed, *explanation* of "my station and its duties", i.e. an analysis of the term that spells out its specific theses and claims, explains connections between them, and specifies Bradley's position towards them.

3 'My station and its duties' and its many claims

I suggest that "my station and its duties" is a rubric embracing a bundle of claims and theses: some Bradley accepts, some he denies; some are a part of the MSID theory, some belong to his critique of the MSID theory. I distinguish between the generic descriptive, normative, and ideal theses, each of which include a number of claims. Below I list the most important of them, accompanied, where possible, by counter statements from *ES*.

I. The generic descriptive thesis that it is a matter of fact, supported by cultural and historical observations, that society has authority over an individual, determining what she is and, through laws and custom, dictating what she ought to do.

¹² More on "my station and its duties": Wright (1984) analyses the concept of the moral organism and concludes that Bradley did not understand the term. Crossley (1989) problematizes the idea of the state's right over an individual. For Bell, the "[t]he true focus of *Ethical Studies* is to be found ... in ... 'My Station and its Duties'" (1984, p. 55). Banchetti (1992) explores Hegelian overtones in the doctrine of MSID. Macintyre (1994) compares Bradley and Pincoff. Keene (2009) relates Bradley's social and moral philosophy. Brink (2007) points to problems with Bradley's Essay V, demonstrating the difference between Green and Bradley. Stern (2013) argues that one cannot explain moral obligation in Essay VI through the concept of my station and its duties. Irwin identifies Bradley's position with the claim that a person achieves her self-realization through the station, "specified by true morality" (2009, p. 571) or "correct moral principles" (2009, p. 569).



Specific descriptive claims:

- *Positional duties*: it is a matter of fact that social roles or stations are associated with certain duties (ES, 176);
- *Nature of an individual*: an individual is reduced to the sum of social roles: “I am myself by sharing with others, by including in my essence relations to them, the relations of the social state” (ES, 173). [Counter claim: “[M]an is not much above the beasts unless more than social” (ES, 223, see also 203-4)];
- *Determinism*: custom, hereditary features, national and racial characteristics determine personhood (ES, 166-169);
- *Social psychology*: for some, performing their positional duties, obeying the law and custom, is all that is morally required; for others, morality is associated with ideals representing demands of a higher order than social (ES, 205; 214-215);
- *Sociological claim*: there is historical evidence that people exhibit social behaviour (ES, 170) and societies superimpose their will over the will of individuals (ES, 165);
- *Cultural claim*: in existing societies, laws, custom, and tradition represent institutionalised norms (e.g. ES, 173);
- *Social ontology*: only relationships between people are real; therefore, only social unities (family, society, and the state) are facts (ES, 163-74);
- *Cultural relativism*: it is a fact that some cultures accept moral beliefs that conflict with those of other cultures (ES, 189).¹³

II. *The generic normative thesis*, according to which existing social institutions, such as law and custom, generate moral requirements; what one ought to do is fully determined by the requirements of one’s society.¹⁴

Specific normative claims:

- What a person *ought* to do is determined by her positional duties (ES, 173). [Counter claims: (a) one has no moral obligation to perform one’s positional duties if the state is in corrupt condition (ES, 203) and when overridden by another type of duty; (b) what one ought to do is determined by the moral ideal (ES, 219)].
- Positional duties are *the only moral requirements* (ES, 183). [Counter claims: (a) one is morally required to realize social ideals, produce art and knowledge (ES, 219); (b) one must evaluate social norms from a higher point of view (ES, 204); (c) personal perfection and the perfection of social requirements are moral duties (ES, 200; 204); (e) all moral duties are duties to oneself (ES, 219, n. 3; not to be confused with selfishness).¹⁵]
- *An action is right/good iff* it is necessary for discharging one’s positional duty. [Counter claims: morality cannot be reduced to norms of existing society (ES,

¹³ For descriptive relativism, see Timmons (2002, 43 ff.).

¹⁴ Compare to the communitarian “normative independency thesis”, which holds that local social practices have an inherent ability to generate obligation (Simmons 2001, p. 81).

¹⁵ This fact is often overlooked. As a rule, commentators believe that moral duties in ES are either duties to others or that some of them are duties to oneself (see, e.g., Candlish 1978, p. 164).

204) and moral goodness is a matter of correspondence to the ideal (*ES*, 205, 219).]

- *Only common good is valuable in itself*; it must be the goal of an individual human life (e.g. *ES*, 180). [Counter claim: truth and beauty are also goods in themselves (*ES*, 223).]
- Performance of one's positional duties must be *the only criterion for moral evaluation* (*ES*, 183). [Counter claim: the only criterion of moral evaluation is a person's striving for her ideal (*ES*, 247 ff.).]

III. The ideal thesis that holds that morality consists of the realization of the self, identified with the moral ideal.

- *Bottom-up ideal thesis*, according to which what ought to be is reduced to what is: the existing social order is the moral ideal (e.g., *ES*, 201). The moral goal is the reproduction of social reality, and the ideal self is the idealised social self. The latter I take to mean traditional beliefs about what is necessary for a successful performance of social roles together with corresponding social practices, which have been turned into a standard. The ideal is social because it reflects existing social practices.

[Counter thesis: the *top-down ideal thesis*, according to which what ought to be is irreducible to what is (moral ideals are irreducible to existing models, the ideal self is irreducible to social relations (*ES*, 205)), and reality is altered to become ideal (e.g., the moral goal consists in the realization of the ideal of human nature). Here the ideal is called social because it sets the standard of interpersonal relationships.]

Before a conclusion can be drawn from any of these theses, Bradley's position towards it has to be determined. For instance, the MSID theory derives the normative thesis (and specific claims about what one ought to do and which actions/persons are right/good) from the descriptive thesis (statements about a matter of fact) because the theory employs the bottom-up idealization (reducing what ought to be to what is). Bradley, I argue, does not imply such a thing, and this is clear from his adoption of the top-down idealization tactic (changing reality to meet the ideal).¹⁶ Failing to distinguish between these claims leads to a confused picture of Bradley's point of view in *ES*.

4 Bradley's exposition of the MSID theory in Essay V 'My Station and Its Duties'

The misunderstanding of Bradley's ethics can often be traced to the misidentification of structural elements in Essay V.¹⁷ Bradley first clarifies the context of the MSID theory (160-162) and outlines it (162-163); then elaborates (163-174), examines (174-202), and criticizes it (181-183, 202-206). The transition from exposition to

¹⁶ Many, e.g., Nicholson (1990) and Keene (2009), presuppose that the first element of the moral ideal is based on bottom-up idealization.

¹⁷ This is acknowledged, e.g., by Nicholson (1990, p. 31).



criticism is latent because of Bradley's idiosyncratic method. He temporarily adopts the point of view he is discussing, writing *as if* he has already accepted it. This is done for the sake of argument. This rhetorical strategy allows the presentation of arguments *as if* they were coming from the doctrine's adherent. Bradley then gradually takes its main claims and arguments to the extreme, exploring its limitations and consequences. Finally, Bradley separates his own voice from that of the doctrine's adherent in a full-fledged criticism.

The MSID theory is one of four responses to the question about the ultimate moral goal (Essay II). Introducing the theory, Bradley sets out to examine the third¹⁸ alternative account of moral personhood.¹⁹ Hedonism (Essay III) and Kantianism (Essay VI) proved unsatisfactory: the former reduces the self to a bundle of sensations and cannot be universalized, while the latter reduces it to a principle which is too perfect to be realized (see *ES*, 160). At this point, the MSID theory *may seem* (Bradley accepts it only for the sake of argument) to avoid these mistakes; it *gives an illusion of* offering an account of the self that is both "specified" and "universalizable". The moral self is defined in terms of social roles, having specific or "objective" duties that are prescribed by existing social institutions and justified by custom. Society is seen as "a moral organism" and persons are its "organs". The moral goal is the identification with and "the realization of the good will which is superior to ourselves" (*ES*, 162).

The elaboration of the MSID theory takes the form of a dialogue between the doctrine's adherent (voiced by Bradley) and a hypothetical critic. The discussion centres on a descriptive anti-individualist thesis that declares the supremacy of the social whole over the individual and argues that a person is fully determined by education, custom, race, national, and cultural determinants. From these descriptive claims the MSID theory infers its normative thesis: since the individual *is* fully reduced to a social function, this determines what she should *be*.

Next, Bradley analyses what appears to be the MSID theory's advantage: identifying herself with her station and obeying social commands, the person achieves her realization in the concrete-universal whole (Bradley's way of saying that the person's actions are that of the universalized moral agent). Most importantly, the MSID theory claims to overcome the contradiction between ought and is: "There I realize myself morally, so that not only what I ought to be in the world is, but I am what I ought to be... '[M]y station and its duties' teaches us to identify others and ourselves with the station we fill; to consider that as good, and by virtue of that to consider others and ourselves good too" (*ES*, 181). This allows the MSID theory to claim that morality is "objective" because what people want, aspire to, and do coincide with local social practices and institutionalised norms and requirements:

To be moral, I must will my station and its duties [...] [M]y private choice, so far as I am moral, is the mere form of bestowing myself on, and identifying myself with, the will of the moral organism, which realizes in its process both itself and myself. Hence we see that what I have to do ... [is] to fill my place—the

¹⁸ The fourth alternative is the ideal self.

¹⁹ For more on the moral self in *ES*, see Babushkina (2016).

place that waits for me to fill it; to make my private self the means, my life the sphere and the function of the soul of the whole, which thus, personal in me, externalizes both itself and me into a solid reality, which is both mine and its. (ES, 180-181)

For the MSID theory, there is no difference between morality and politics: "Personal morality and political and social institutions can not exist apart" (ES, 188). Finally, according to the MSID theory, positional duties, while prescribing specific courses of action, depending on the occupied role, are *in some sense* universalizable (everyone having the same social roles as me would have the same duties).

Pages 183-189 of ES depict the psychological make-up of a person embracing the MSID theory, turning it into an ode to the "moral organism" with lengthy quotes from Hegel. The exposition of the doctrine continues with responses to two challenges. First, in response to the objection that MSID theory entails moral relativism (ES, 189-193),²⁰ Bradley distinguishes between institutionalised social norms, which he also calls "ordinary morality" (ES, 226) or "common social morality", and true "Morality" (ES, 191). While in the former norms depend on the imperfect knowledge of "the truth of the human nature" that people have at a given period of time and location, in the latter norms reflect the truth of human nature, are objective and universalizable. Common morality is a stage of the development of human spirit towards true Morality. When morality is reduced to institutionalised traditional norms, "*unless* morals varied, there could be no morality; that a morality which was *not* relative would be futile, and I would have to ask for something 'more relative than this'" (ES, 189). The second challenge is that relative as it is, the doctrine does not provide a criterion of knowing which actions are right and wrong (ES, 193-199). Bradley replies that knowing the right course of action in each particular case is a matter of convention and not that of an ethical theory.

5 Bradley's criticism of MSID theory in Essay V 'My Station and Its Duties'

In my view, Bradley rejects the MSID theory's normative claims as well as its claim that the individual is reducible to her social relations. I have at least two reasons to think so: Bradley's criticism of the reduction of ought to is, and what can be seen as an *argumentum ad absurdum* showing that accepting the MSID theory yields serious moral problems.

The first critical evaluation of the MSID theory starts already on p. 181 within the discussion of its advantages, and, arguably, takes the general form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Living by the MSID theory results in practices that are, practically, amoral, such as (terms in *italics* are mine):

²⁰ Moral relativism in ES (connection to cultural relativism, dependency claim, moral universalism, and objectivism) demands a more detailed exposition than I am able to provide here.



- *Moral superficiality*, i.e. judging a person good despite her vices, if she performs her positional duties: “It teaches us that a man who does his work ... is good, notwithstanding his faults, if his faults do not prevent him from fulfilling his station” (ES, 181).
- *Rejection of moral relevance of intention*: “[MSID theory] tells us that the heart is an idle abstraction; we are not to think of it, nor must we look at our insides, but at our work and our life, and say to ourselves, Am I fulfilling my appointed function or not?” (ES, 181).
- *Moral shallowness* or denial of aspirations beyond what is expected by custom and a requirement to be content with one’s lot in life: “[I]f I take my place in the world I ought not to be discontented” (ES, 182); “My heart I am not to think of, except to tell by my work whether it is in my work, and one with the moral whole; and if that is so ... with that I am satisfied, and have no right to be dissatisfied” (ES, 183).
- *Moral self-delusion* or ignoring one’s badness, “refusing to identify myself with the bad will of my private self”:

[A]s a member in the moral organism, I am to consider myself real, and I am not to consider the false self real. That can not be attributed to me in my character of member in the organism. ... Hence, not existing for the organism, it does not exist for me [...] though bad habits cling to and even arise in me, yet I can not but be aware myself as the reality of the good will. That is my essential side; my imperfections are not, and practically they do not matter. (ES, 182-183)

The reductio ad absurdum reaches its apex in a lengthy ironic passage exposing the superficiality of the MSID theory’s generic normative theses. The theory’s limitations consist in the reduction of morality to existing social institutions: “We have thus seen the community to be the real moral idea, to be stronger than the theories and the practice of its members against it, and to give us self-realization. And this is indeed limitation” (ES, 201). Bradley tells us that the MSID theory denies the moral relevance of emotions, aspirations, desires and interests, as well as “visions of superhuman morality, ... ideal societies, and ... practical ‘ideals’ generally”. It is

strong against ... passions, and in the end it triumphs over the fact, and can smile at the literature, even of sentimentalism ... It laughs at its frenzied apotheosis of the yet unsatisfied passion it calls love; and at that embitterment too which has lost its illusions, and yet can not let them go—with its kindness for the genius too clever in general to do anything in particular, and its adoration of star-gazing virgins with souls above their spheres, whose wish to be something in the world takes the form of wanting to do something with it, and who in the end do badly what they might have done in the beginning well; and, worse than all, its cynical contempt for what deserves only pity, sacrifice of a life for work to the best of one’s lights, a sacrifice despised not simply because it has failed but, because it is stupid, and uninteresting, and altogether unsentimental. (ES, 201-202)

Bradley's second argument (*ES*, 203-206) is against MSID's normative thesis, and it consists in denying the bottom-up thesis (the reduction of ought to is). Here are the most important of his reasons. First, reducing ideal personhood to station leaves an open question whether the person who fulfils her positional duties is a good person. Believing that she is good just so long as she is performing her positional duties is a form of self-delusion or extreme faith. Moral badness has more forms than failing to perform one's positional duties: a person "can only forget his faults when he is too busy to think about them; and he can hardly be so always. And he can not always *see* that his faults do not matter to the moral order of things: when it comes to that he can only trust" (*ES*, 203; see also 214). Moreover, the state may be in "a confused or rotten condition, so that right and might do not always go together" (*ES*, 204).

Second, the reduction of the moral community to existing social communities is unjustified:

[I]f we accept ... the fact that the essence of a man involves identity with others,²¹ the question what the final reality of that identity is, is still left unanswered: we should still have to ask what is the higher whole in which the individual is a function, and in which the relative wholes subsist, and to inquire whether that community is, or can be, a visible community at all. (*ES*, 204)

Third, the reduction of moral norms to custom and law is erroneous, since "[a] man can not take his morality simply from the moral world he is in, for many reasons" (*ES*, 204). Moral goodness is "goodness not of any particular time and country" (*ES*, 205) and it is incompatible with an obvious cultural relativism of morals (*ES*, 204). Finally, benefiting others is not the only moral commitment: "the moral man can to a certain extent distinguish his moral essence from his particular function ... the content of the ideal self does not fall wholly within any community, is in short *not* merely the ideal of a perfect social being" (*ES*, 205). Artistic and scientific accomplishments, bringing no necessary benefit to others, are of significant moral worth.

Bradley's criticism of the MSID theory devalues its moral worth. The theory offers a secure and easy way of being regarded as good by removing responsibility for any act exceeding social expectation and making only one demand—to do our job. However, by doing so, the MSID theory reveals its shallow standards as it does not take into account intentions, does not require anything beyond action pertaining to one's positional duties, and does not permit evaluating authority and everyday rule-of-thumb morality. Accepting the MSID theory comes with a high moral price as we risk *not doing enough* and morally under-performing. It is hard to see how Bradley could accept the MSID theory even with "amendments" or "supplements": to presuppose that he does, one must either believe that Bradley himself is unaware of the seriousness of his argument, or be able to come up with a good explanation of how Bradley's "own theory" avoids these charges.

²¹ Note, Bradley writes that identity with others is one of the essential characteristics of a person, but does not claim that personhood is reduced to relations with others.



Bradley, I believe, rejects most of MSID's normative and descriptive claims, as well as its bottom-up thesis. Adopting a top-down idealization strategy, Bradley puts forward a *revised MSID thesis*, subordinating social requirements to the ideal point of view.

6 Positional duties and moral obligation

This passage is crucial for understanding the relationship between positional duties and moral obligation in *ES*:

It is necessary to remark that the community in which [the moral man] is a member may be in a confused or rotten condition, so that in it right and might do not always go together. [...] A man can not take his morality simply from the moral world he is in, for many reasons. ... That a moral world, being in a state of historical development, is not and can not be self-consistent; and the man must thus stand before and above inconsistencies, and reflect on them. This must lead to the knowledge that the world is not altogether as it should be, and to a process of trying to make it better. (*ES*, 203-4)

Bradley is warning that we should not follow social commands unreflectively; otherwise, we risk doing something that is morally wrong. For example, the society may be in a corrupt state or, as history shows, just bad and, thus, its demands may be bad as well. Note, Bradley does not say that one must not obey *when* the society is in a rotten state. He says one cannot obey blindly, because the society *may be* in a corrupt state. This possibility must be a part of our moral reasoning. How is one able to even think about the very possibility of her society being corrupt?

Apparently, the MSID theory is ill equipped for that. A corrupt society is blind to its corruptness: goodness/rightness is a matter of obeying social commands by definition. *Whatever* is demanded from the person in the form of a positional duty is always justified, e.g., with a reference to a custom or value that is accepted by the majority. From within social morality, there is no way of thinking that social practices, norms, and demands are corrupt. Anyone who accepts the MSID normative and moral theses is bound to think that, at least when justified by custom, they are good. A worry about corruptness must be motivated by considerations other than those of social morality.

Determining whether our society is in a corrupt state involves evaluation, which must be conducted with reference to a normative system which is external to the evaluated normative system and subjects it. One must be able to connect specific social requirements with the values by which the given society justifies the requirements (internal values), and then be able to compare this value to another value, which is independent from the normative code of her society (external values). Such a judgement involves ranking external and internal values. A society can only be said to be corrupt in the light of an external standard representing a value of a higher order. Note another implication of Bradley's words: if one judges that a particular social demand is bad, one ought not to perform this act, despite its being one's positional duty.

Bradley says not merely that it is *possible* but that it is *obligatory* for a person to make a value-judgement about social norms and requirements. But why? My explanation is this. Social requirements are justified by values which are institutional facts (see Anscombe 1958; Searle 1995), i.e. are conditional upon the existence of social institutions. This means that they cannot be truly universalized and do not apply to everyone in the same way.

More specifically, there are two important aspects of moral obligation. First, it refers to a final, conclusive reason that a person has for acting; something she, all things considered, *ought to do*, compared to *having some reason* to do. Second, moral obligation has a universal attribution: when a person has a moral obligation to perform a certain action, this means, *inter alia*, that anyone in the same situation would have the same obligation. Moral obligations are universalizable because they are justified by reference to values which are unconditionally accepted on the ground of rationality. The acceptability of these values is independent of one's preferences and one's belonging to any group or institution.

Positional duties represent expectations that others may have of the person in virtue of her relation to them and that are justified by those things that people of a given society have traditionally considered as valuable. Such values refer to the historical facts, practices, and beliefs of people belonging to the specific society or institution, and thus are institutional facts. Positional duties represent context-relative obligations as they depend on the broader context of one's life. For instance, whether one has a duty to defend family honour depends on whether one occupies a specific role (father) and whether in one's society this specific task (defending family honour) is a traditional way (socially recognised) of fulfilling that social role. The problem with social expectations is that they are not truly universalizable, but only in a culture-relative or contextual way: everyone belonging to the same culture (i.e., accepting the same set of institutional facts as values) must have the same set of tasks when occupying the same social role.

But what if defending family honour requires killing an unmarried daughter who had sex with a man? As a member of society where honour killing is a traditional way of purifying the family, a parent knows what he is expected to do and why; he knows his duty, and he knows that he is justified by the long history of his society and its values. However, honour killing has no justification outside this particular tradition, and therefore cannot be obligatory in the moral sense.

In the abovementioned quote, Bradley opens up the possibility of doubting that one's positional duty is in all cases one's moral obligation. As applied to my example, this means that, being a part of such a tradition, the parent may not know whether honour killing is morally justified and obligatory, but she has a prerogative of doubt and must use it. She has to abandon the social point of view and evaluate social values from a higher point of view, ensuring that they are not morally reprehensible. This higher point of view, I argue, is the ideal point of view.²²

²² The distinction between social and moral points of view is straightforward in Bradley (1999), where he opposes social organism to morality: "Self-realization covers everything. (i) *Sittlichkeit*. Here the station which is, is realized in me. (ii) Morality. Ideal which is not is and is not realized in me. Infinite process. (iii) Religion. Here ideal which (for faith is) is realized in me by faith" (214).



7 The moral point of view and the ideal point of view

Deontological and utilitarian solutions are unavailable for Bradley. Religious justification must be ruled out because religious values are themselves institutional facts.²³ The ideal point of view is the only alternative left. The moral point of view is not supplemented by the ideal; it *is* the ideal point of view. In my interpretation, Bradley suggests that it is the sanction of the moral ideal that makes a social requirement an obligation. In addition to being a social requirement, an act must also be required from the ideal point of view. This amounts to saying that my performing an act must not contradict the ideal of the person that I aspire to be.

What is the ideal point of view? What does it mean to assume an ideal point of view? It is hard to answer these questions based only on Bradley's description of the moral ideal in *ES*, as it is not detailed enough. I suggest that, in *ES*, to take an ideal point of view implies, first, assuming that a value is fully realized in reality and, then, based on this assumption, to prescribe a course of action for the achievement of a desirable goal. This involves—according to Rescher's (1987) account of moral ideals—envisioning what the world would be like if there were no obstacles or hindrances to the realization of a value and it was fully realized, i.e. a possible world in which reality is a complete expression of the value. The ideal point of view is a thought experiment that removes hindrances for the full realization of some desirable state of affairs and allows one to see what has to be changed in the real world so that what, so far, ought to be, can become real.

The ideal point of view, thus, has direct practical relevance: it informs the agent about the existing obstacles to achieving the desirable state of affairs and prescribes a course of actions that is required for the achievement of the state of affairs where the value is fully realized. The ideal point of view makes possible the top-down identification of ought and is because it gives direction to changing reality to fit the standard of perfection; it does not lower the standard to reflect reality.

The ideal point of view is that of a universalized agent. Evaluating an act from the ideal point of view means to make a judgement that is reasonably expected from everyone in the same situation, despite their personal preference. The ideal point of view is informed by the knowledge of the “true human nature” (*ES*, 192),²⁴ the highest of human values.

The moral ideal is a *personalized ideal*: one can only adopt an ideal point of view from her own perspective. The person relates the human ideal to the specific condition of her life, her relationship with others, the ideas about human excellence common for her time, as well as her intellectual and aesthetical aspirations. While the universalizability principle holds that what is required from me under specific conditions is required from anyone in the same situation, the particularization prin-

²³ The concept of religion in *ES* and its relation to morality is a topic for separate research. I argue that taking a religious point of view signifies abandoning the moral point of view.

²⁴ On *ES* in connection to the idea of human nature and perfectionism, see Hurka (1993).



ciple reads that an action that is required from everyone in a given situation is also required from me when I am in that situation.²⁵

I do not mean that, for Bradley, the moral ideal is subjective. Bradley does not imply that it is formed on the basis of personal preferences or whims. His point is that the realization of the moral ideal is always a personal project; it is carried out in the reality of one's life (e.g., given her specific relations to others): the moral ideal refers to the norms governing these relationships, ideas of virtues, and ultimate goods such as truth and beauty. One can choose whether she wants to be a mother but not the norms governing the relationship between daughter and mother, and thus not what she is required to do as a mother (this, however, does not mean that she is unable to evaluate and criticise her duties).

Despite the ambiguity of Bradley's terminology, given the general development of his argument, it is obvious that, in Essay VI, "my station and its duties" no longer refers to positional duties. Here we are dealing with a revised MSID thesis, which is motivated by an ideal point of view and is based on a *normative* concept of one's station. Bradley gives little (if any) explanation. One way to interpret this concept would be to suggest that we ought to perform positional duties prescribed by an ideal society. I do not find this satisfactory because Bradley sees moral progress as self-realization (i.e. the progress of the self towards the ideal) and not as the perfection of the state. It is more plausible that Bradley has in mind reasonable expectations that others can have from us due to the nature of the relationship between us, and that he points to norms governing pre-institutionalised inter-personal relationships (see Norman 1983, p. 155). In Essay V, duties are social because they are authorised by existing social institutions; in Essay VI, because their realization is conditional upon our relations with other people: "They directly involve relation to other men, and, if you remove others, you immediately make the practice of these virtues impossible" (ES, 221).

If my interpretation is valid, then the important—albeit latent—message that Bradley tries to give us with his confusing analyses of "my station and its duties" is: any demand that others put on us in virtue of our relations to them can be regarded as a moral demand when it is justified from the ideal point of view. An essential part of this justification is the connection between the required act and the conception of myself as the embodiment of the truth of human nature. The act is morally obligatory iff it is necessary for the maintenance of my identity as a true human being.

Acknowledgements I am thankful to Timo Airaksinen, William Mander, Elizabeth Frazer, Peter Nicholson, and James Connelly for their comments on the drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to David Crossley for his help and advice. The greater part of the work on this paper was carried out in the Spring of 2016 at Harris Manchester College (University of Oxford), and I feel indebted to its staff and members for their assistance, especially to Susan Killoran and Ralph Waller.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

²⁵ In Bradley's terms, this amounts to saying that when a person judges an action right from an ideal point of view, she has become a part of the concrete-universal whole, i.e. has identified with the moral ideal.



Funding My visit to Oxford was supported by Oscar Öflunds Stiftelse. Open access funding provided by University of Helsinki including Helsinki University Central Hospital.

References

- Anscombe, G.E.M. (1958). On Brute Facts. *Analysis*, 18, 69–72.
- Babushkina, D. (2016). F.H. Bradley's Conception of the Moral Self: A New Reading. In W. J. Mander & S. Panagakou (Eds.), *British Idealism and the Concept of the Self*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Banchetti, M. (1992). My Station and Its Duties. *Idealistic Studies*, 22, 11–27.
- Bell, D. (1984). The Insufficiency of Ethics. In A. Manser & G. Stock (Eds.), *The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bradley, F.H. (1962). *Ethical Studies*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bradley, F.H. (1999). Notes towards *Ethical Studies* [c. 1874–5]. In C.A. Keene (Ed.), *Collected Works of F.H. Bradley*, Vol. 1. Bristol: Thoemmes.
- Bradley, J. (1996). Process and Historical Crisis in F.H. Bradley's Ethics of Feeling. In MacEwen, Ph. (Ed.), *Ethics, metaphysics and religion in the thought of F.H. Bradley*, New York: Lewiston.
- Brink, D. O. (2007). *Perfectionism and the Common Good*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Candlish, S. (1978). Bradley's My Station and Its Duties. *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, 56, 155–70.
- Crossley, D. (1989). Bradley on the Absolute Rights of the State over the Individual. In G. LaFrance (Ed.), *Ethics and Basic Rights*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Daly, C. (1963). F.H. Bradley's Idealist Ethics. *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 30(1), 3–22.
- Hurka, Th. (1993). *Perfectionism*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Ilodigwe, D. (2004). Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, and Dialectic: Self-Realisation and its Equivocations. *Bradley Studies* Vol. 10, Nos. 1&2, 65–87.
- Irwin, T. (2009). *The Development of Ethics. Vol. III: From Kant to Rawls*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keene, C. (2009). "The Interplay of Bradley's Social and Moral Philosophy". In W. Sweet (Ed.), *The Moral, Social and Political Philosophy of the British Idealists*. Exeter and Charlottesville: Imprint Press.
- Krook, D. (1959). *Three Traditions of Moral Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacNiven, Don (1987). *Bradley's Moral Psychology*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- MacNiven, Don (1996). "Metaphysics and Ethics in Bradley's Idealism". In Ph. MacEwen, (Ed.), *Ethics, Metaphysics and Religion in the Thought of F.H. Bradley*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Maintyre, A. (1994). My Station and Its Virtues. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 19, 1–8.
- Mander, W.J. (2011). *British Idealism: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nicholson, P.P. (1984). Bradley as a Political Philosopher. A. Manser & G. Stock (Eds.), *The Philosophy after F.H. Bradley*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nicholson, P.P. (1990). *The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norman, R. (1983). *The Moral Philosophers: An Introduction to Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Rashdall, H. (1907). *The Theory of Good and Evil*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Rescher, N. (1987). *Ethical Idealism*. California: University of California Press.
- Ross, R. (Ed.) (1951). *Ethical Studies: Selected Studies*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Sabine, G. (1915). The Social Origin in Absolute Idealism. *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 21, 169–77.
- Santayana G. (1933). *Some Turns of thought in modern philosophy*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J.R. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. Harmondsworth: Allen Lane.
- Sidgwick, H. (1876). *Ethical Studies*. By F.H. Bradley [Book Review]. *Mind*, 1(4), 545–549.
- Simmons, A. (1981). *Moral Principles and Political Obligation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Simmons, A. (2001). Associative Political Obligations. *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stebbing, L. (1948). *Ideals and Illusions*. London: Watts & Co.
- Stern, R. (2013). 'My Station and Its Duties': Social Role Accounts of Obligation in Green and Bradley. N. Boyle, L. Disley, I. Coper (Eds.), *The Impact of Idealism*. Vol. 1. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Timmons, M. (2002). *Moral Theory*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Warnock, M. (1971). *Ethics since 1900*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Wollheim, R. (1962). Introduction. In F.H. Bradley *Ethical Studies*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Wollheim, R. (1969). *F.H. Bradley*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Wright, C. (1984). The Moral Organism. In A. Manser & G. Stock (Eds.), *The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.